



American
Public Health
Association

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Protect, Prevent, Live Well

June 6, 2012

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
United States Senate
332 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Sanders:

On behalf of the American Public Health Association (APHA), the oldest and most diverse organization of public health professionals in the world, I write to express our strong support for the Comprehensive Dental Reform Act of 2012.

The United States must establish a comprehensive nationwide approach to address the lack of access to needed dental care and reduce oral health disparities in order to end the nation's oral health crisis. Oral health is an integral part of overall health and well-being. According to the 2000 U.S. Surgeon General's report, *Oral Health in America*, the burden of oral problems is extensive. While the lack of access to oral health services is a national problem, there are specific populations that remain underserved at greater rates including low-income, racial and ethnic minorities, pregnant women, older adults, individuals with special needs, and individuals living in rural communities. There are profound oral health disparities within the U.S.; and reducing disparities requires wide-ranging approaches that target populations at highest risk for specific oral disease.

By expanding coverage, creating new access points, enhancing the workforce, improving education, and funding new research, the Comprehensive Dental Reform Act will drive down health disparities and improve public health. The evidence is clear—the lack of access to oral health services takes a toll on the well-being and pocketbooks of individuals. Over 40 percent of total expenditures on dental care in the U.S are out-of-pocket payments by individuals. The oral health crisis also proves costly for our nation and our nation's productivity. In 2009, there were over 830,000 visits to emergency rooms across the U.S. for preventable dental conditions, 16 percent higher than in 2006. Additionally, oral health issues greatly contribute to our nation's high rate of absenteeism in schools and work.

We are pleased that your bill extends comprehensive dental health insurance to millions of Americans who are not currently covered and expands access to qualified oral health care professionals. We recognize that in order to expand access it is critical to increase the number of oral health professionals, including alternative dental health care providers such as dental therapists, who would be dedicated to working in communities with the greatest need. Through additional education efforts and research, your legislation would help to integrate our segmented health care system.

As an association that is committed to protecting all Americans and their communities from preventable, serious health threats and strives to assure community-based health promotion and disease prevention activities and preventive health services are universally accessible in the United States, we thank you for introducing this important piece of legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Georges C. Benjamin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "G".

Georges C. Benjamin, MD, FACP, FACEP (E)
Executive Director